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I love to work outside in the yard, from mowing the lawn to pulling weeds to planting trees to spreading mulch. Sometimes I encounter surprising things as I'm outside, such as last week while pulling weeds amongst the ivy growing in a flower bed. Something began moving. At first I ignored it, thinking I had imagined it, but then I saw the ivy move again. Suddenly a toad hopped across the flower bed as it hurried away from my weeding activity.

The next day I read a similar encounter in an email church newsletter from Missy Rose, my friend and fellow pastor from Missouri. She described an encounter she had while working in her flowerbed. She wrote:

There's a snake in my flowerbed. I saw it 3 weeks ago while pulling weeds. Solution? Ignore the flowerbed. Unfortunately this is not a sustainable solution. It was already in bad shape. You can tell by the fact that a snake was hiding in the weeds. So now what? It's human nature to ignore situations that

are obnoxious, frightening or difficult. A snake in the garden can ruin your day. Best to just leave that alone, right? But what about the flowerbed?<sup>1</sup>

Have you ever encountered situations you would rather leave alone and ignore? This week's psalm might be one of those things we wish to avoid, especially the emotional intensity. I'd much rather enjoy last Sunday's psalm, a celebration of thanksgiving for what God has done. We made some joyful noise last Sunday as we explored Psalm 100, didn't we? This past week several people continued to suggest we "make some noise" in celebration of what God is doing around here, so I hesitate to explore Psalm 13. Why ruin a good thing? Maybe we could just leave it alone, for it's a lament for a time when the bottom drops out, when life goes awry, when despair enters our lives. Maybe we could just avoid this psalm, much as we would like to avoid a snake in the garden.

But I think most of us know that just ignoring the painful parts of life doesn't make them go away,

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for the emotions still rumble underneath the surface, sometimes erupting in unexpected ways. Even a year after experiencing a great loss, sometimes the emotional intensity can come back and haunt us, prompting us to lament all over again. We might find ourselves sad and distraught, wondering why the sorrow has entered our lives again, surprised by the sudden occurrence a year later. When we suddenly realize that we are still processing the loss from a year ago, we may ask, along with the psalmist, *“How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?”*

That snake in the garden lurks in the corner of our soul, waiting silently, and when it appears, we may once again echo the words of the psalm writer, *“How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?”*

Our Bible study group has been reading through the psalms on Tuesday mornings, and we quite often encounter these lament psalms. Some days

we feel like avoiding the intensity of these laments, much preferring to skip to the joyful psalms of praise. But as we’ve entered into discussion of these lament psalms, we have discovered that they echo the pains of our own lives. Each one of us can relate to the emotional intensity of these psalms of lament, and as one group member suggested, “These lament psalms reflect the intensity of real life.” When I asked, “Why do you think the biblical writers included these lament psalms?” someone suggested, “Because they reflect what life is really like. They’re honest with God about the struggles of life, and they encourage us to be honest with God as well.”

Our study group wondered what it would be like if all the psalms were happy and joyful. What if the writers ignored the painful portions of life, as in ignoring the snake in the garden? We realized that it might be difficult to read these always-happy-psalms, for then we would begin to think that life is supposed to always be filled with joy and

happiness, that there must be something wrong with those of us who suffer and struggle. The words of the psalms would no longer reflect what life is really like. Our group decided that we need the psalms of lament, for they remind us of the reality of life, and they comfort us with the reminder of God's presence.

Interesting, we discovered that many of the lament psalms end in a similar way. Did you hear how this psalm ended? *"But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation."* The laments almost always seem to end with a glimmer of hope. Even when the bottom of life drops out, the writers look beyond the pain to God's promise that something new can occur.

The well-known Disciples preacher Fred Craddock once told a story about a daughter experiencing the painful loss of her father, a story filled with lament—but also with a surprise ending:

"My mother took us to church and Sunday school; my father didn't go. He complained about

Sunday dinner being later when she came home. Sometimes the preacher would call, and my father would say, "I know what the church wants. Church doesn't care about me. Church wants another name, another pledge, another name, another pledge. Right? Isn't that the name of it? Another name, another pledge." That's what he always said.

Sometimes we'd have a revival. Pastor would bring the evangelist and say to the evangelist, "There's one now, sic him, get him, get him," and my father would say the same thing. Every time, my mother in the kitchen, always nervous, in fear of flaring tempers, of somebody being hurt. And always my father said, "The church doesn't care about me. The church wants another name and another pledge." I guess I heard it a thousand times.

One time he didn't say it. He was in the veteran's hospital, and he was down to 73 pounds. They'd taken out his throat, and he said, "It's too late." They put in a metal tube, and X-rays burned him to pieces. I flew in to see him. He couldn't speak, couldn't eat. I

looked around the room, potted plants and cut flowers on all the windowsills, a stack of cards twenty inches deep beside his bed. And even that tray where they put food, if you can eat, on that was a flower. And all the flowers beside the bed, every card, every blossom, were from persons or groups from the church.

He saw me read a card. He could not speak, so he took a Kleenex box and wrote on the side of it a line from Shakespeare. If he had not written this line, I would not tell you this story. He wrote: “In this harsh world, draw your breath in pain to tell my story.”

I said, “What is your story, Daddy?”

And he wrote, “I was wrong.”<sup>2</sup>

This father discovered that at the end of life, after experiencing the lament of a life without the church, that he was wrong. He discovered that the church meant more than pledges and fund drives,

for the church means cards of comfort and flowers of hope. This father felt compelled to tell a new story to his daughter, one that he wanted her to tell to others.

I think that’s a good thing to affirm on this Father’s Day: that in the midst of the struggles of life, when the bottom drops out in our lives, rather than focusing solely on those things that have to be done—like finances and fixing things—or rather than ignoring the emotions that seem too intense—like the snakes in the garden—we can experience the times of struggle and lament, while we also anticipate the moments of hope and kindness.

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<sup>2</sup> *Craddock Stories*, Fred Craddock, 14.

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<sup>1</sup> Missy Rose, *The ePistle*, First Presbyterian Church, Kennett, MO, June 14, 2017.